

Do speakers align at the discourse level?

The role of discourse segments in task-oriented dialogue

Junfei Hu* & Liesbeth Degand

University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium | E-mail: junfei.hu@uclouvain.be | Twitter: JunfeiH

Introduction

- Interactive alignment: Dialogic partners tend to produce an utterance that shares some of the linguistic properties of a prior utterance in dialogue.
- Conversational discourse units (CDUs) : The building blocks of spoken discourse resulting from the mapping of syntactic, intonational and pragmatic units.

Question & Hypothesis

- Do interlocutors align at the discourse segmentation level?
- Discourse segmentation is an indicator of discourse alignment: Interlocutors choose the same type of CDU to perform the same type of action at a given position in the sequence

Data & Method

- Five task-oriented dialogues (6.3h, 1521 CDUs, F = 6, $M_{age} = 29.1$, same gender, unacquainted, Native English)

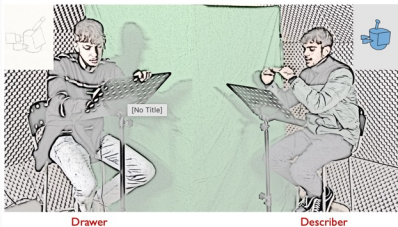


Table 1. The experimental progress of each dialogic pair.

Participants	Practice	Main stage of data collection									
A	PI	I	3	5	7	9	11				
B	P2	2	4	6	8	10	12				

Conversational discourse unit

- Syntactic unit: (A)verbal dependency clause and discourse particles.
- Intonation unit: Marked by pause, pitch reset and lengthening.
- Pragmatic unit: One step in implementing interlocutor's dialogic plan.

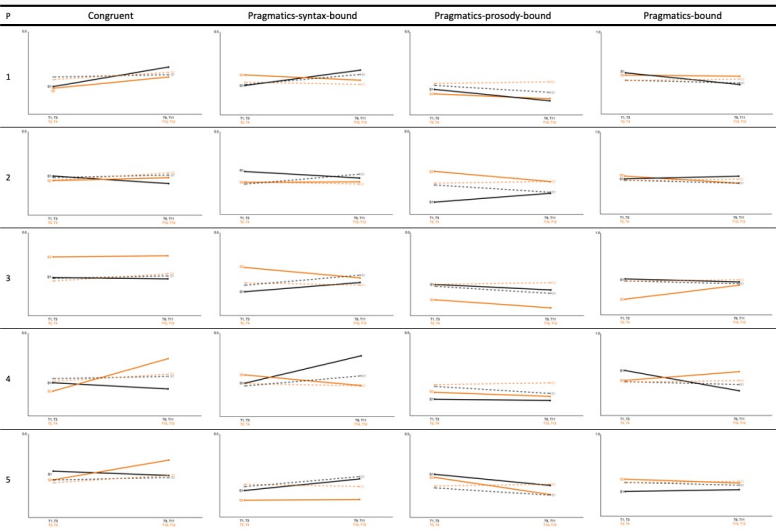
Instructive actions

Focus on the type of CDU used at the instruction-giving position within each instructive sequence.

Table 2. Type of conversational discourse unit.

Type of CDU	Inside structure of CDU (PU: < >; SU: //; IU: each line stands for one IU)	Example
Congruent	one PU corresponds to one SU and one IU	<you see it kind of straight on.//>
Pragmatics-syntax-bound	one PU corresponds to one SU and two or more IUs	<the first shape? looks like a cup? with a bunch of stuff attached to it.//>
Pragmatics-prosody-bound	one PU corresponds to one IU and two or more SUs	<but// other than that it's a regular rectangle.//>
Pragmatics-bound	one PU corresponds to two or more SUs and IUs	<and then// they go, in like a, like a staircase?//>

Findings & Conclusions



Calculation: Proportion of the usage of each type of CDU
Speaker1 (black lines): (Trail 1+3) and (Trail 9+11)
Speaker2 (orange lines): (Trail 2+4) and (Trail 10+12)

Observations:

- No specific pattern when all dialogic pairs are put together (the dash lines).
- Individually, each dialogic pair (the concrete lines) either intersects with or converges across all types of CDU.

Conclusions & Implications:

- Discourse alignment is conversation-specific. Each dialogic pair develops its own way of alignment.
- Discourse alignment is dynamic. Interlocutors systematically end up to be similar to their dialogic partner in terms of the choice of CDU type to conduct the instruction.
- Alignment at discourse level indicates the underlying process of it is largely automatic.

Selected references

[1] Degand, L., & Simon, A. C. (2009). On identifying basic discourse units in speech: theoretical and empirical issues. *Discours: Revue de linguistique, psycholinguistique et informatique*. [2] Pickering, M. J., & Garrod, S. (2021). *Understanding dialogue: Language use and social interaction*. Cambridge University Press.